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# **Adjusting Special Forces Officer Professional Military Education**

By

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**Abstract**

The post Desert Storm conflicts have shown the enemy has adapted the means of engaging the United States in conflict. These conflicts have not centered on engaging and destroying a military force but rather securing political victories. United States Special Forces will continue to conduct their unique primary missions and collateral activities within this environment and the training of the Special Forces officer should best equip him to operate accordingly. Special Forces officer education should be sustained throughout the career of the officer with a focus on language, cultural competency, interagency processes, and joint and Special Operations Forces doctrine.

This thesis examines the aspects of Special Forces Professional Military Education as it relates to the contemporary operating environment and proposes recommendations for adjustments in Special Forces officer education. The intent is to provide a viable option for better equipping today's Special Forces officers to meet the challenges of tomorrow.



Special Forces (SF) branch is responsible for the six primary missions of unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, special reconnaissance, counter-terrorism, counter-proliferation, direct action and the four collateral activities of antiterrorism, counter-narcotics, search and rescue, and special activities. These missions are unique to SF and require a high degree of training apart from the conventional military curriculum. The education encompassing these missions and activities should be continuous throughout the career of an SF officer though there is currently no formal SF education beyond the initial Special Forces Qualification Course (SFQC). SF officers require a separate professional military education (PME) track that focuses on cultural competency, language proficiency, the interagency (IA) process, and joint forces and special operations doctrine to enable successful and efficient conduct of their mandated missions and activities within the contemporary operating environment.

The operating environment has changed significantly since Operation Desert Storm. The success of Desert Storm did not leave without question the supremacy of the United States military but rather demonstrated to our future adversaries that the means with which to engage the United States on the field of battle has changed. These changes manifested themselves during operations in Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iraq where it has become apparent that enemies will not play to the strengths of the U.S. but will instead employ hybrid and irregular methods of warfare to secure political victories rather than decisive military victories.<sup>1</sup> Special Forces can expect to play a decisive role in current and future wars because of the irregular warfare methods they are expected to both employ and counter. SF PME needs to better enable success based on the challenges presented by this environment. Some may argue that this would result in too narrow of an education for field grade SF officers. The intent of this SF PME would be to ensure

SF officers receive the same baseline military education as their peers with the inclusion, not separation, of SF specific subjects into an existing intermediate level education (ILE) program. This would complement and further the education provided by the SFQC. It would also ensure SF officers continue to receive SF specific training throughout their careers while also receiving the education that would allow them to excel in positions outside of the SF community alongside their Army and other service peers.

The SFQC would perform the same function of providing the base-line education where company grade officers would continue to be trained on SF missions and leadership as it relates to working with indigenous forces as well as mission planning, briefing and language.<sup>2</sup> The first proposed change to the SFQC is the inclusion of limited immersion training. Officers would get the opportunity to conduct short duration immersion training within native speaking communities in the U.S. or Canada to continue to build their language and cultural skills. The introduction to the IA would also be added. This short duration introduction (3-5 days) would ensure that SF officers could communicate effectively with country teams in a way that builds rapport and increases the credibility of the SF community by focusing on such things as points of contact, respective interests, and briefing techniques.

Officer ILE would then be used to continue Special Forces education by offering a curriculum specific to SF field grade officers. Some would argue that an SF track is already available at the Army Ft. Leavenworth ILE. There is a SOF Studies Program that focuses on operational level planning, history, and implementation but this program does not include the critical factors of culture or language. The Interagency Studies Program is also available but again places no emphasis on language or culture and is by application and selection only.<sup>3</sup>

Instead, I propose implementing core classes that would be required of all SF officers within the construct of an existing ILE program. These core classes would consist of cultural study specific to their language, continued language training, interagency processes specific to the coordination and working group levels, and joint and special operations forces doctrine. The recommendation of a location for this school is outside the scope and intent of this paper though conducting it as part of the Army ILE at FT. Leavenworth or the Special Operations Low Intensity Conflict Course in Montgomery, CA offer two excellent starting points. Upon completion of this course select officers would attend foreign immersion programs to further build language and cultural skills while other select officers would perform IA exchanges for SOCOM. The core classes will now be discussed in further detail starting with culture.

SF missions and collateral activities necessitate that SF work with other nations and foreign groups, primarily in countries with non-western cultures and populations that do not speak English. A failure to understand these cultures can produce unsound strategy and operational and tactical failure resulting in the prolonging of insurgencies, an erosion of public opinion, and the unnecessary endangering of both troop and civilian lives.<sup>4</sup> Cultural competency greatly assists SF in gaining and maintaining rapport with their foreign counterparts. This rapport is so crucial that it can mean the difference between mission accomplishment and mission failure. Victor Rosello states that the cultural training the military needs to embrace goes beyond awareness and should reach a level of “appreciation”. He also states that cultural awareness “implies being aware of cultural values, beliefs, and rules of conduct” whereas appreciation “views things at levels below the surface and [is] more complex in nature.”<sup>5</sup> This appreciation is the knowledge level that needs to reside within SF though awareness is most

often taught. This knowledge would allow local rather than foreign solutions to be used in problem solving and objective accomplishment concerning the conduct of warfare, security, and other missions.<sup>6</sup> The importance of family, lineage, customs, tribal affiliation, and religion and how it relates to behavior and loyalties must be understood in order to effectively operate within a culture. Cultural competency would also allow a better understanding of not only friendly and enemy forces but also of the civilian population. The importance of this cannot be overstated as a vulnerable population is one of the ingredients needed for an insurgency to occur. Some may argue that SF officers receive cultural training in the initial SFQC. This is true, but it only addresses why culture is important, not specific cultural education, and there is currently no institutional training of culture beyond the SFQC. At the completion of this cultural training the officer would understand the underlying themes of the particular culture to include political and religious themes. This would allow the officer to more readily anticipate and identify problems that in turn could be solved using local solutions. Identifying and knowing these themes will help officers understand the human factors, or put more simply, why people behave and react the way do.

Officers also need to be proficient in a second language to effectively train and employ foreign forces as well as to gain the cultural competency mentioned above. Being able to communicate effectively is critical to understanding the culture and that skill should serve as one of the most important factors in bridging cultural gaps and building rapport. SF are expected to be able to conduct unconventional warfare which, by definition, involves equipping, training, supporting, and advising / directing foreign or surrogate forces for an extended duration.<sup>7</sup> This activity will normally be conducted in a non- or semi-permissive environment where interpreters



may be pose an additional risk and which are often inadequate for anything beyond medial communication. As an example, a Foreign Area Officer (FAO) working in Iraq, who was fluent in Arabic, discovered that many interpreters spoke very poor Arabic. In his words, “When General Rodriquez (then U.S. Chief of Staff for Northern Iraq) spoke he was articulate. His interpreter made him sound like an eighth grader.”<sup>8</sup> This language capability would ensure effective communication while also allowing SF to effectively work with coalition partners in both training and combat operations. While SF officers do receive language training in the SFQC it is only for a limited duration (three or six months depending on the complexity of the language) and there is no standard educational process for proficiency once the basic language course is completed. The vast majority of SF personnel do not progress beyond an elementary language level throughout their entire career as there is no mechanism in place for progression. At the completion of this course SF officers would possess a working knowledge of the language that would allow them to effectively communicate and build rapport without the use of an interpreter.

SF officers also need to be knowledgeable of the interagency community and processes. The unique missions and employment of Special Forces result in officers regularly acting within the interagency realm, much more so than their conventional counterparts. Because of this, SF officers should be required to know the different agency missions, organizations, and cultural and institutional differences at both the macro and micro level as success may very well depend on a good working relationship with these agencies. This understanding would empower the SF officer to act both effectively and credibly at all levels from the country team to the coordination that occurs stateside. The interagency is defined as “the coordination that occurs between

elements of the Department of Defense and engaged U.S. Government agencies for the purpose of achieving an objective”<sup>9</sup> and is an environment the SF officer will have to be able to function in. Special Forces officers will likely encounter other agencies on a tactical level inside a combat theater and will certainly encounter them while performing collateral activities and planning outside of a combat zone. This means that SF may be interacting primarily with agencies outside of the DOD and the officer will need to know where particular expertise and authorities reside in order to more effectively accomplish their missions. SF will enter countries under a variety of conditions ranging from counterterrorism to capacity building and will be required to coordinate with such agencies as the State Department prior to entering. Once inside the country the officer will need to be prepared to brief at the country team level and will regularly coordinate and work with other agencies such as the Drug Enforcement Agency, Departments of Treasury and Agriculture, and the CIA to name but a few.<sup>10</sup> SF officers will “frequently require access to the interagency representatives”<sup>11</sup> and the success of the mission may hinge on the understanding of the relationships and interests of these varying representatives and agencies.

The SF officer will also interact with different members of the host nation (HN) as well as representatives of both intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Though these entities are not part of the interagency by formal definition they need to be included in the education as they are closely aligned with the IA and the same fundamentals apply. Many of these representatives and organizations are acting according to their own agendas and pursuing their own objectives. Despite the potential difference in objectives the actions of these partners and organizations will likely impact SF actions and vice

versa, while it is also likely that they can also assist each other in many areas such as information sharing or perhaps even in the attainment of a shared end state.<sup>12</sup> These potential impacts, both positive and negative, make it critical that the officers understand the environment they are going to operate in to ensure SF objectives are met, unity of effort is attained, and credibility and freedom of action is maintained or increased. The officer, with the proper education, could actively coordinate with these differing parties to gain the greatest effects from the differing activities. The ability of the SF officer to navigate through this environment will be based on his knowledge as well as his ability to establish and maintain informal relationships as there will likely be no formal command relationships established. At the completion of this course SF officers will be prepared to represent SOF within the interagency community at levels above and outside of the country team.

SF officers will also be required to know joint force and special operations doctrine. SF will continue to operate within the scope of geographic combatant commanders and joint task forces alongside their conventional counterparts. It is imperative that SF officers continue to receive the same education as their peers within the services concerning joint doctrine in order to be able to effectively plan and integrate operations. SF officers also need to have a thorough understanding of the conduct of joint special operations to include the respective capabilities, limitations, structure, history, and core tasks of the SOF specific units. This knowledge will also assist in the integration of SOF into the planning and execution that is conducted by the Joint Force Commander (JFC) with SOF operating alongside their conventional counterparts. SF officers need to understand the conventional planning and command and control process as well as being able to advise the JFC on the best use of SOF to ensure that “the execution of special

operations (SO) is through proper SOF command and control elements responsive to the needs of the supported commander.”<sup>13</sup> At the completion of this course SF officers will be able to lead SOF throughout the full spectrum of operations on joint, multi-national, or interagency teams.

United States Army Special Forces officer education needs to be adjusted to better equip officers for success in accomplishing their primary missions and collateral activities within the contemporary operating environment. This operating environment will continue to necessitate the use of SF to combat the irregular methods of warfare that the enemy will employ, an environment where the destruction of the enemy has become secondary to denying the enemy the political victories they desire. Throughout all of this SF will be expected to bring a successful conclusion to the mission with minimal loss of life and a minimum expenditure of resources. The unique scope of these missions and collateral activities requires that an SF PME curriculum be established to enable the continued successful and efficient conduct of their mandated missions and activities.

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- <sup>1</sup> Canfield, Daniel T.. “ Winfield Scott’s 1847 Mexico City Campaign as a Model for Future Warfare”, *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Issue 55. 96
- <sup>2</sup> Russel D. Howard, *Educating Special Forces Junior Leaders for a Complex Security Environment*. JSOU Report 09-6. Hurlburt Field, Florida: Joint Special Operations University, 2009, 13-14.
- <sup>3</sup> Course description obtained from the Special Forces Branch Manager
- <sup>4</sup> Montgomery McFate, “The Military Utility of Understanding Adversary Culture”, *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Issue 38, 42-48.
- <sup>5</sup> Victor M. Rossello, “Cultural Awareness or Cultural Appreciation: Is There a Difference?”, *Small Wars Journal*, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/284-rosello.pdf>
- <sup>6</sup> Colonel Henri Bore’, “Cultural Awareness and Irregular Warfare: French Army Experience in Africa, *Military Review*, July-August 2006, 109.
- <sup>7</sup> Field Manual (FM) 3-05.20, Special Forces Operations, October 2006, Glossary-20.
- <sup>8</sup> Greg Jaffe, Local Knowledge: In Iraq, One Officer Uses Cultural Skills to Fight Insurgents; While Talking Like a Bedouin He Sees Smuggling Routes; Spotting a Phony Kurd; Army Has Recalled His Unit, *Wall Street Journal* (Eastern edition), Nov 15, 2005
- <sup>9</sup> Joint Special Operations University Manual (JSOU), *Special Operations Forces Interagency Counterterrorism Reference Manual*, March 2009, 1-26.
- <sup>10</sup> Russel D. Howard, *Educating Special Forces Junior Leaders for a Complex Security Environment*. JSOU Report 09-6. Hurlburt Field, Florida: Joint Special Operations University, 2009, 18.
- <sup>11</sup> Joint Special Operations University Manual (JSOU), *Special Operations Forces Interagency Counterterrorism Reference Manual*, March 2009, 2-4.
- <sup>12</sup> Joint Special Operations University Manual (JSOU), *Special Operations Forces Interagency Counterterrorism Reference Manual*, March 2009, 3-2.
- <sup>13</sup> Joint Special Operations University Manual (JSOU), *Special Operations Forces Reference Manual*, Second edition, August 2008, 1-3.